

EARLY CONVICT NOVELS

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FOR the *Term of His Natural Life* (as Marcus Clarke's grim account of the convict era is now generally known) is acknowledged as an Australian classic. But, although the most powerful and, certainly, the best-known, convict novel, it was not the first of its kind. There are two important forerunners, both of which deal with varying aspects of the transportation system and its relationship to free settlement. There is also a tantalisingly short fragment that, if the lost chapters could be restored or the later ones written, might be found equally relevant.

The first of these early novels is *Rebel Convicts*, published anonymously in Melbourne in 1858 and never reprinted. The second is *The Broad Arrow*, published in Hobart the following year and reprinted by Bentley in London as an abridged version in 1886. I believe that Peter Pierce is now editing a new critical edition for the Colonial Editions series. The third forerunner consists of four chapters from 'Hector Beaumont', a novel that appeared as a serial story in two consecutive Melbourne periodicals in 1864.

To look first at *Rebel Convicts*. I came across this novel some years ago while working on the periodicals, in particular, the *Illustrated Journal of Australasia*, printed and published successively by George Slater and W. H. Williams. This journal, which was a leading periodical of the time, ran from 1856 to 1858, with William Sydney Gibbons as the first editor, followed by Frederick Sinnett. It contained articles on general and literary topics, serial and short stories, poetry, notes on various topics and, in short, the usual contents of a literary miscellany. Its editors also included an interesting monthly news summary dealing with current events, politics, science and industry, literature and art. This was a section designed for English readers as well as colonial subscribers, being reprinted in the *Newsletter of Australasia*, published from 1856 to 1860 with a blank space for personal letters.

During his time as editor, Frederick Sinnett wrote a long essay, 'The Fiction Fields of Australia' for publication in the *Illustrated Journal*. The importance of this essay as the first piece of sustained literary criticism published in Australia was confirmed with its reprinting by the University of Queensland Press in 1966, edited by Cecil Hadgraft. Frederick Sinnett, a journalist and literary critic who was also a founder and the first editor of *Melbourne Punch*, was looking for a colonial novel that presented 'a picture of universal human life and passion, but represented as modified by Australian externals', i.e., a novel that might be accepted as literature both in the colony and by those at home. In demonstration of this theme, Sinnett went on to discuss examples of colonial fiction, concluding with the hope for stimulation of further works of an appropriate kind.

Rebel Convicts appears to have been a direct result of Sinnett's concern. Its title-page is headed 'The Fiction Fields of Australia', with the sub-title as 'an Australian novel'. Published by George Slater and printed by W. H. Williams, it is a novel of 204 pages. The anonymous author explains in the introduction that much of the work originated as disconnected chapters 'written at intervals to relieve the dull monotony of a bush life', and now combined with new material to link it all together. Colonial incidents and events, including those dealing with the convict system are claimed to be historically based, allowing for changes in location and the avoidance of known proper names.

Briefly, the story is that of Irish political and religious rebels, transported because of their involvement in the rebellion of 1798. The hero, Francis Newton, is sent to New South Wales as a political offender. Becoming an assigned servant, he inspires sufficient confidence in his employer to be given the responsibility for forming a station property in the outlying district. The villain, Connel O'Meara, known in Ireland as a traitor, murderer and heartless womaniser, serves most of his time in penal settlements at Port Arthur and Macquarie Harbour in Van Diemen's Land. The lives of these two men as convicts run along parallel though largely separate lines, allowing the author to portray different aspects of the colonial environment. In the end, after his adventures with Aborigines and bushrangers, Newton is reunited with his childhood sweetheart, while O'Meara, now known as Connel Roe, is killed by the father of the girl whom he has wronged and murdered, acting in self-defence. All the loose ends, including those of the minor characters, are neatly tied.

The novel received a long and favourable review in the *Illustrated Journal*, probably by Frederick Sinnett. There was also a favourable review in *My Note Book*, consisting largely of extracts. But neither reviewer gave any indication of the identity of the author, which is not altogether surprising because of the current journalistic tradition of writing anonymously. However, I have long been curious about him - and it is obvious from the introduction that it is a male author. Because of the strong literary inclinations of its principals and the network in which they moved, it is likely that he was one of the contributors to the *Illustrated Journal*. Going through those recognisable through further evidence, the main possibilities seemed to be Sinnett himself, Thomas McCombie, James Smith or R.H. Horne. However, in his introduction, the author refers to having taken incidents from his previously published work, 'Ireland, its Lakes, Rivers and Scenery'. Nowhere could I find any reference to this book, if indeed it did exist, and any other investigation taken at the time proved fruitless.

Recently, though, Victor Crittenden has looked at the book for me through the good offices of Elizabeth Morrison. Victor has a very good knowledge of work written for colonial periodicals and, by applying particular criteria, he has suggested that R. H. Horne was the author of *Rebel Convicts*. None of the other candidates appears to have visited Ireland, but Horne spent a year there in 1846 as correspondent for the *Daily News*, Charles Dickens's new Liberal paper. In *The Farthing Poet*, her biography of Horne, Ann Blainey describes the journey that took him across and around Ireland. While in that country and based in Dublin, Horne also met members of the Young Ireland Movement, including Charles Gavan Duffy, whom he was to meet again in Australia. Horne's travels in Ireland could have provided the basis for 'Ireland, its Lakes, Rivers and Scenery' - perhaps in the form of articles for the *Daily News* - while his association with the Irish politics of the time might have sparked the idea of writing a novel about political prisoners.

Victor Crittenden also found other correspondences, including the fact that Horne had travelled overland from Sydney, giving him some knowledge of the New South Wales tablelands. His experience as a gold escort is an important factor of identity, as well as his activities as a reporter on the gold fields. Stylistically, and this needs more work, the poetic descriptions of scenery and the use of language in the novel suggest that it may well have been written by Horne. He was certainly in Melbourne at the time, contributing to local periodicals and taking an active part in the cultural life of the city. This was also a time when his personal fortunes were changing. He was out of work and short of money, living with a woman by whom he had recently fathered a son while still undivorced from his English wife. After this baby died, he lost interest in writing and became deeply

depressed, which perhaps explains the lack of any claim to the novel.

While much of this is necessarily speculative, there is no doubt about the identity of the author of *The Broad Arrow*. This novel was written by a woman, who, to disguise her identity though not her gender, used the pseudonym of Oliné Keese. Her real name was Caroline Leakey, and the pseudonym a play on the letters of that name. Caroline Leakey came out to Van Diemen's Land from England to stay with her sister who was married to a religious instructor. The frequent ill-health that prevented a great deal of outside activity allowed her plenty of time for the observation of colonial society, both convict and free. Caroline Leakey was also very devout, taking the opportunity, wherever possible, to insert a religious truth or a moral caution.

The hero in this story is a female convict. Maida Gwynnham (or Martha Grylls, to use her convict name) is transported for the murder of her illegitimate child, a crime of which she is innocent. She has, however, committed a forgery at the instigation of the child's father, the worthless Captain Norwell. Accepting responsibility for the greater charge in order to save the Captain, she is sent to Van Diemen's Land, where she becomes an assigned servant in the house of Mr George Evelyn, whose brother, Rev. Herbert Evelyn, acts as a kindly mentor. Back in England, Norwell marries, but his wife intercepts a letter from Maida, and so learns about her husband's former infamy. Mrs Norwell dies of shock, after which the Captain goes out to Van Diemen's Land to find that Maida has also decided to lay down and die, following her conversion to true Christianity through the deathbed example of Rev. Herbert's daughter Emmeline. Norwell becomes insane and is confined to an asylum, while the minor characters are variously disposed of through marriage, death or disappointment.

The Broad Arrow, mostly set in Hobart, also includes scenes from Port Arthur and Macquarie Harbour. It was written after Caroline Leakey returned to England in 1853. Although she wrote no further novels, she continued other writing, mainly religious in character, until her death in 1881. Gillian Winter, from the State Library of Tasmania, whose recent article on Caroline Leakey and her Tasmanian experiences as the basis for *The Broad Arrow*, published in the Papers and Proceedings of the Tasmanian Historical Research Association, has found the novel particularly interesting for its social detail. In turn, I am indebted to Gillian for detailed information on Caroline Leakey's life and work.

Now we come to the third of the novels I have described as forerunners. This is 'Hector Beaumill', by someone called Luscar Canmore, of Melbourne. Only four chapters appear to have survived and, since they begin at Chapter 13, a good deal seems to have gone before. However, this assumption is contradicted by a reference at the beginning of the instalment to the 'prelude' that has previously been published. Many of the colonial periodicals were short-lived and it was not uncommon for serial stories to remain incomplete when a magazine suffered premature closure. The *Penny Melbourne Journal*, in which the first chapters of 'Hector Beaumill' were supposed to have appeared, was founded in Melbourne in 1862 by Henry Samuel Ward, a staff member of the *Age* and, later, the *Herald*. Designed as a popular weekly paper along the lines of the successful English penny weeklies, it ran from October to November 1862; then, in 1864, it reappeared as a monthly under the title of the *Australian Family Journal*. Some copies of the first version of this periodical are held by the State Library of Victoria, though, unfortunately, not those containing the beginning of the serial story.

In its truncated form, 'Hector Beaumill' is about a convict transported 'for the term of his natural life' because of his involvement in machine-breaking riots. Chapter 13, called 'The Convict Ship', opens with a sad mother and her grand-daughter farewelling

the transport in which he sails. A benevolent woman sees their distress and invites them to her home. After the grandmother dies during the night, this woman offers to look after the child. In Chapter 14, called 'The Shipwreck', we meet the hero Hector Beaumill who, apparently of good birth and/or position, has carried out his resolve to become a common sailor in the merchant service. Some of the men who survive the shipwreck resort to cannibalism while they drift helplessly. Some of them also drop overboard and Hector alone is left to be rescued by a Dutch ship bound for Batavia. Chapter 15, 'Canvas Town' is about Melbourne during the gold-rushes and the new arrivals, among them the free emigrant Jamie Webster, who seems to be the main character in the sub-plot. There is a strongly anti-Semitic confrontation with a Jewish dealer named Aaron, and an account of a gathering of thieves, one of whom Jamie Webster, seeing him later in the street, recognises as Todler Nip, transported because of his activities as captain of the riots. And that's all.

My main purpose in looking at these novels has been to try to ascertain what use, if any, was made of them by Marcus Clarke. There are similarities in sections of the plots of *Rebel Convicts* and *His Natural Life*, for instance the change of name, although that is of less significance in the first novel. There are instances of imprisonment at Port Arthur, of floggings, suicide over a cliff, wrecking the Commandant's boat, cannibalism, a convict chained to a rock at Macquarie Harbour, and a woman's help ungratefully taken. However, similar aspects of convict life were well documented and Clarke may have taken them directly from the records. It is not known whether he had read *Rebel Convicts* before writing *His Natural Life*. The novel is not listed in the catalogue of his personal library and, although he was working in the State Library when the library acquired its copy (held, by the way, with the Emigration Pamphlets), the acquisition date was September 1874, after the revised version of his novel was published.

There are also a few similarities in sections of *The Broad Arrow*, although it is written from a different perspective. Caroline Leakey's major interest appears to have been in the assignment system and its effect on both masters and servants. She was in a position while in Hobart to hear stories of events at Port Arthur and Macquarie Harbour from her sister's husband and other officials. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering her family connections, she includes instances of cruelty from convict overseers and others with power, but much of the suffering of the convicts in *The Broad Arrow* is caused by the cruelty of their fellow prisoners. This is especially noticeable when the one being tormented happens to be of superior breeding. Clarke may have used this novel as background reading, without necessarily drawing directly on any of its incidents. If so, he made no acknowledgment, even though the novel was included in the catalogue for the sale of his library in 1874.

So far as 'Hector Beaumill' is concerned, I have begun to wonder whether Clarke was more closely connected with it than the other two. With only three chapters to go on, it is hard to draw firm conclusions, even though one of those chapters has a similar title to one in *His Natural Life*: 'The Convict Ship'/'The Prison Ship', and another, 'The Shipwreck' could be linked to 'The Fate of the Hydaspes'. What first engaged my attention was the name of the author. Luscar Canmore sounds as though it could be a made-up name, especially when there is no one called that in the Sands & McDougall directories from 1862 to 1865. Could it be an anagram? Well, if you try to find another name in Luscar Canmore, you almost come up with Marcus Clarke. It is not an exact anagram: there is an extra 'n' in Canmore and an extra 'k' in Clarke. However, it is about as close as 'Thyra Gebinn', used by Annie Bright, when writing for *Cosmos Magazine* in the 1890s.

Marcus Clarke did not arrive in Melbourne until 1863, so he could not have been the author of the first chapters of 'Hector Beaumill'. It is possible that he might have continued the novel in August 1864. He would then have been only 18, but he was writing for publication, as instanced by the short story in the *Hamilton Spectator*, published in January 1865, just after he went to live on his uncle's station at Swinton. This story, discovered by Nan Bowman Albinski, is an early example of the witty, flippant mode that Clarke was to develop to remarkable heights. 'Hector Beaumill' is nothing like this: in many respects it is over-written, as one might perhaps expect from an aspiring but comparatively inexperienced writer. In fact, the first chapter is perhaps by another hand, left over from the *Penny Melbourne Journal* instalments. However, the section dealing with the gang of thieves, is somewhat reminiscent of Clarke's style as demonstrated in the conversation of the convicts on the prison ship in *His Natural Life*. There are also instances of literary and classical allusions and quotations, such as Clarke enjoyed.

The possible identification of Marcus Clarke as the author of 'Hector Beaumill' is tentative and based largely on supposition, which requires further consideration. I am hoping that, as I go on with the work of editing the new critical edition of *His Natural Life*, I will be able to find more definite links with this early convict novel. It is probably too much to hope that later issues of the *Australian Family Journal* may be found; so far as I know, it was no more successful than its predecessor, the *Penny Melbourne Journal*. However, I shall keep on looking for resemblances and, in time, may be able to provide a more definite answer to the suggestion that Marcus Clarke was interested in the effects of the transportation system from an earlier period than is now generally accepted.